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John Pennington

"Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence," writes William Blake in his radical and paradoxical *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a marriage that prompted C.S. Lewis to annul in *The Great Divorce*. In Blake's universe opposites attract and repel and inform one another. As Martin Nurmi explains,

> A human world must be informed by opposed yet positive and complementary forces which, when allowed to interact without external restraint, impart to life a motion and a tension that make it creative. (559)

This dialectic is extremely complex, for unlike Yin and Yang which separates light from dark, good from evil into balancing forces (a philosophy at the heart of many of Ursula Le Guin's fantasies and science fiction tales), Blake's philosophy encompasses contraries as simultaneous entities; these oppositions become the touchstone to the imagination and to creativity. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake's most accessible work, is also structured upon contraries: innocence and experience, the lamb and the tiger, the echoing green and London, the shepherd and the bard. The prelapsarian world of innocence, however, needs the influence of the experienced world since the Fall; otherwise, innocence becomes a victim of experience, as attested by the chimney sweeper's hopeful and naive rationalization for his pitiable condition. Experience, partly born from rigid and binding reason, blights innocence, but this too is essential. Mary Lynn Johnson and John Grant suggest that

> in the reader's mind the claims of Innocence and Experience should be weighed against each other; it is possible for the reader to share with the artist a vision that encompasses both and allows for the growth that comes out of continual strife of contraries. (17)

In a sense, Blake's mythology is anti-romantic and highly realistic. "Opposition is true Friendship," writes Blake in *The Marriage:* "From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy." Yet such good and evil are symbiotic, and our preconceived notions of these dichotomies must be modified and refined to encapsulate a more realistic design.

This overly succinct and limited synopsis of Blake's mythology points to the archetypal patterns that are the bases of romance, fairy and folktale, and fantasy. Brian Attebery claims that

> more than realistic fiction, it [fantasy] can clarify philosophical and moral conflicts, embodying them in story lines that may not be directly applicable to our own complex and muddied lives but which can please or inspire because of their open and evident design. This is one of the most important accomplishments at which fantasy can aim, to give comprehensible form to life, death, good, and evil; this has always been the primary aim of the earliest kind of fantasy, the folktale. (3-4)

And R.E. Foust contends that

> it is by the unambiguity of this core encounter between Good and Evil that fantasy, unlike realism, asserts its mythic intentions: it conserves by reasoning ancient social ideals of decency, order, and proscribed behavior. (17)

Attebery and Foust identify, it seems, the more conservative and simplistic design and function of much fantasy –

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good versus evil, often a cut-and-dry separation where good prevails over evil, a structure that C.S. Lewis and Tolkien basically follow. There are, however, more complex fantasies which muddle these polarities and explore the tenuous relationship between good and evil, fantasies that subscribe to Blake's theory of contraries.

In his review essay on the *The Lord of the Rings*, Peter S. Beagle argues that the forces that power Tolkien's trilogy are similar to those that control our daily lives – "history, chance, and desire" (129). "*The Lord of the Rings*," continues Beagle,

> is a tale of Frodo's journey through a long nightmare of greed and terrible energy, of his education in both fear and true beauty, and of final loss of the world he seeks to save. In a sense, his growing knowledge has eaten up the joy and the innocent strength that made him, of all the wise and magic people he encounters, the only one fit to bear the Ring. (130)

Beagle's diction – *energy, knowledge, innocent* – is peculiarly Blakean, and in Beagle's fantasy world we can see Blake's contraries at work. Reason and Energy. Love and Hate. Good and Evil. Innocence and Experience. These opposites are what keep Beagle's imaginative world alive, and in *The Last Unicorn*, his most sustained fantasy, such contraries are the key that keeps the work progressing.

The Last Unicorn has received overwhelming praise. As the blurb on my edition claims, it is "one of the world's most beloved fantasies," even made into a successful, though overly childish, animated feature film. Robert H. Boyer and Kenneth J. Zahorski believe that "if there were a 'ten best' list of modern fantasy, *The Last Unicorn* would certainly be on it" (51). And that would include a list of such luminaries as Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Le guin. Yet some critics are unimpressed with Beagle's creation, most notably C.N. Manlove and Brian Attebery. Manlove considers *The Last Unicorn* an anemic work, and though Attebery praises moments of the work – Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival, the barren Hagsgate, the sea-enslaved unicorns, and the Red Bull – he feels that "its characters and imagery go flying off in all directions, without reference to the patterns of significance that should command" (159). His major complaint is that Beagle's attempt at a "literary homage" to Tolkien misfires because he is unable to find a proper balance between Thurberesque humor and Tolkienesque grandeur:

> The graft fails to take, and the two components draw apart, the magic into sentimentality and the modern voice into embarrassed joking. . . . But Beagle does not gather these things into a satisfying whole because he lacks faith in them. (159)

The Last Unicorn is certainly an unusual fantasy, hovering between humor and pathos, but these two strains are conscious selections. Another way to view *The Last Unicorn* is to read it as a homage and a parody simultaneously, to see it as encompassing contradictory "visions" not unlike Blake's cosmos. Beagle creates in *The Last Unicorn* a new breed of fantasy that is dependent upon traditional fairy-tale structures and themes but one that also undercuts these and forges into new fantasy territory. Beagle's precursors? George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, James Thurber.

To define fantasy is to open Pandora's box – near chaos reigns. Tolkien, Todorov, Brooke-Rose, Rabkin, Irwin, Swinfen, Jackson, to only name a few have all attempted to define fantasy; each study has its own merits, but as in any kind of classification and definition, these studies are limited to the select few fantasies that "fit" an individual theory. Definition of fantasy becomes exclusive, myopic, often useless as a literary tool. This is the central concern of Kathryn Hume in *Fantasy and Mimesis*, an engrossing study of fantasy in relation to realism. Hume intends to be more inclusive in her definition of fantasy; she contends

> that literature is the product of two impulses. These are *mimesis*, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and *fantasy*, the desire to change givens and later reality – out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience's verbal defences. (20)

In his recent fantasy *The Folk of the Air*, Beagle takes literally Hume's conception of literature and tries to fuse the realistic with the fantastic, with definitely mixed results. Hume identifies two strains of fantasy that help us begin to categorize *The Last Unicorn*. One strain is the fantasy of *vision* which "aims to disturb us by dislodging us from our settled sense of reality, and tries to engage our emotions on behalf of this new version of the real" (56). A fantasy of vision can achieve this end by "manipulating our literary expectations, giving us a different presentation of reality than we expect from the form or story (as Gardner does in *Grendel*)" (83). The fantasy of *revision*, on the other hand, "lays out plans for revising reality, for shaping futures" (56); this type of fantasy focuses on man and the cosmos – on man's relation with himself and the world – and works more on the didactic level, for

> we are given the grounds for saying that one action is good while another is bad – or effective and ineffective, or proper and improper. One can assimilate an experience readily if one can classify and relate it to other experiences. A didactic system gives us that framework, and with it, prescriptions for our own responses and action. This guidance helps lessen the indigestibility of chaotic experience. (103)

The fantasy of vision is "expressive" and "expects only reaction," while the fantasy of revision is "didactic" and pushes "the reader from passive agreement to action" (56). As these definitions imply, the fantasy of vision is diametrically opposed to the fantasy of revision – one explodes our notion of a coherent reality, the other rearranges it into an easily accessible form. Lewis could be

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pigeon-holed as a revisionist, Borges as a visionist.

The Last Unicorn incorporates these contradictory strains of fantasy – the work is both vision and revision – and this may point to Attebery's complaint: *The Last Unicorn* does indeed meld together disparate narrative approaches. On the visionist level, *The Last Unicorn* is a metafictional or metafantastical tale that consciously analyzes itself as a literary creation. Beagle undercuts, parodies, and revises traditional fairy-tale structures into a modern schematic that accounts more effectively for Blakean contraries. On the revisionist level, though, Beagle ironically provides us with a foundation to lay good and evil, innocence and experience together, provides us with a framework that accounts for man and the universe. Beagle's fantasy of vision works more on the structural level, his fantasy of revision on the thematic level, and this tension manifests itself throughout the fantasy. Schmendrick claims in *The Last Unicorn*,

> For only to a magician is the world forever fluid, infinitely mutable and entirely new. Only he knows the secret of change, only he knows truly that all things are crouched in eagerness to become something else, and it is from this universal tension that he draws his power. (138)

From contraries or universal tension comes potentiality and progression, as Blake well knew, and Beagle in *The Last Unicorn* is the literary magician who takes two kinds of cream and churns them magnificently into a powerful and tasty bit of butter.

The best analysis of *The Last Unicorn* is undoubtedly R.E. Foust's "Fabulous Paradigm: Fantasy, Meta-Fantasy, and Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*." "Peter Beagle is the most neglected American fictionist of more than ordinary talent to reach creative maturity in the 1960s" (5), claims Foust perhaps a bit too eagerly. Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Gass, Pynchon – Foust places Beagle in such ranks. His thesis is that Beagle's fantasy is

> a paradigmatic instance of an assured transition now in process from the 'metafictions' of the sixties to the more recent imagination of the fabulous that heralds, it may be, the next evolutionary stage in the development of the novel. (6)

Foust analyzes Beagle's "linguistic playfulness" (10) – "language, then, is highly anachronistic, alliterative, synaethetic, onomatopoeic, metaphoric, and metonymic" (12) – and shows how Beagle collapses mythic and historical temporality, what Foust labels "extra-(con)-textuality" (13). *The Last Unicorn* reflects a timelessness both internal and external to the text which

> signifies Beagle's attempt to augment the reader's skeptical historical attention with both the linear and the mythic tempos of the narrative for the sake of extrapolating from their impacting an extra-textual sense of mythic or timeless possibility. (16)

He ends his study by defining such fantasists as Beagle's as an alteration between "the realistic and the anti-novel":

> It is an extended fictional narrative prose, paying strict attention to deep and repeated verisimilar dislocations, which attempts to deliver the reader into a fictive realm ruled over by heart's desire – by mutability and potency – for the ethical purpose of re-creating and energizing the reader's sense of culturally shared value. (19)

Here we have, it seems, an analogy to the visionist and revisionist fantasy which weaves its spell through opposition. Beagle's metafantasy – the visionist stage – exposes and explores the fictional reality of fairy tales. Such self-reflexivity makes *The Last Unicorn* a new type of fantasy that is a powerful vision for the modern world.

Patricia Waugh posits that

> metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion (6),

and Robert Scholes theorizes that experimental fabulation" – a type of metafiction – assumes

> "that the positivistic basis for traditional realism had been eroded, and that reality, if it could be caught at all, would require a whole new set of fictional skills. (4)

Blake's experimentation with poetic and narrative structures, his blending of the verbal with the visual, his undercutting and parody of Swedenborg's *Treatise Concerning Heaven and Hell*, for example, could classify his *Marriage*, on one level, as a metafictional work. Beagle's strategy is similar: he wants to exhaust the traditional fairy-tale structures and imbue them with new life – to make modern – and he achieves this through metafictional means. In *The Last Unicorn* characters write and revise their own story, aware that they are part of a fairy tale, similar to Escher's hands that draw each other into being.

Disgruntled over his inability to contain and redirect magic, Schmendrick thinks, "The magic knows what it wants to do. . . . But I never know what it knows. Not at the right time, anyway. I'd write it a letter, if I knew were it lived" (63). This allusion to the writing process is a touchstone to Schmendrick's quest to rewrite his fairy tale into a happy ending, and to Beagle's goal to create a new type of fairy tale. *The Last Unicorn* begins as a traditional fairy tale – a unicorn, once upon a time, in an Edenic garden. Immediately, though, the narrative is placed in a larger framework, one antagonistic to the fairy tale. Hunters appear in the wood and debate the reality of unicorns: "'Unicorns are long gone,'" the second man said. 'If, indeed, they ever were. This is a forest like any other'" (3). The hunter's conception of a unicorn is

> "only from books and tales and song. . . . You know no more about unicorns that I do, for I've read the same books and heard the same stories, and I've never seen

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> one either." One hunter remarks, "You don't have to have a golden bridle to catch a unicorn; that part's the fairy tale." (3)

Beagle creates a complex web – characters discuss the nature of fairy tales while they are part of a fairy tale. The hunters allude to Pliny and the Chinese myths about unicorns, yet they are part of this very myth. Fiction becomes reality, even though the characters are unaware that they are part of the very fairy tale.

The unicorn's encounter with the rambling butterfly also reinforces this theme. Giving us a catalogue of such disparate elements from Yeats, Conrad, popular songs, and television commercials, the butterfly represents the medium between the myth and reality, between the timelessness of fairy tales and the timebound world of literature and television. Thus the butterfly is transcendent, able to exist within myth and outside in the real, parallel to the way the hunters can discuss fairy tales as they are part of one. The butterfly is self-conscious of both perspectives, and when the unicorn challenges the butterfly to guess her name, it responds, "Rumplestiltskin" (10), now using traditional folktale material for its means. When the butterfly defines *unicorn* – "Unicorn. Old French, unicorne. Latin, unicornis. Literally, one-horned: *unus*, one and *cornu*, a horn. A fabulous animal resembling a horse with one horn" (12) – it parodies the definition of a horse found in *Hard Times* and pinpoints the structural tension of *The Last Unicorn:* real versus mythical, literary versus extraliterary. Fiction is fleshed into life, life is fleshed into fiction.

Another use of metafictional devices in the fantasy is Beagle's use of the story-within-the story technique to foreshadow and comment on future action. Schmendrick tells us about his mentor Nikos who changed a unicorn into a young man; this "fiction" will shortly become reality. Captain Cully, a rough parody of the Robin Hood myth, consciously tries to insert himself into legend and myth. He boasts,

> One always hopes, of course, even now – to be collected, to be verified, annotated, to have variant versions, even to have one's authenticity doubted . . . well, well, never mind. (71)

This hilarious debunking of academia also raises the question of literary authenticity within the tale itself, and, of course, the Captain, for all his poems and legends, is not the real thing, and Schemendrick calls up the real Robin Hood to show Cully precisely this. Myth again becomes reality within a fictional creation. As Molly understands, "Nay, Cully, you have it backwards. There's no such person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend!" (76). Beagle reinvents myth here; it takes on reality and becomes more real than the fictional reality we are reading. Text is replaced by subtext, or as Waugh explains,

> One way of reinforcing the notion of literary fiction as an alternative world is the use of literary and mythical allusion which remind the reader of the existence of this world outside everyday time and space, of its thoroughgoing textuality and intertextuality. (112)

Other instances in the fantasy show fiction becoming real, or the literary characters in *The Last Unicorn* becoming fiction: the poems of Captain Cully that try to place him into the world of myth; the poem a young maiden sings in hopes of calling up a unicorn (the same poem Lady Amalthea will sing); the legend of Hagsgate that is created to prevent the curse from becoming reality –

> "Those dark tales of Hagsgate that you spoke of – we invented them ourselves, and spread them as widely as we could to make certain that we would have few visitors." (103)

The cumulative effect of these instances is to disturb our notion of what is real and unreal, and Beagle succeeds by disturbing our literary expectations.

By far the most sustained use of metafictional techniques is the character's awareness that they are part of a fairy tale in which they can determine the outcome. As we as readers are challenged to juggle this extra-(con)-textuality, so are the characters. Schmendrick and Molly are the two polar characters who represent various attitudes towards their status as fictional characters. Schmendrick understands that he is in a fairy tale, and he is always looking for plot lines to keep the tale progressing, and he understands that certain triggers must be present in a fairy tale. He tells Molly, who complains about the citizens who abandoned a young child,

> Well, if they hadn't, he couldn't have grown up to be a prince. Haven't you ever been in a fairy tale before? The hero has to make a prophecy come true, and the villain is the one who has to stop him – though in another kind of story, it's more often true the other way around. . . . I've been waiting for this tale to turn up a leading man. (109)

Molly, however, feels that only the unicorn is real, others just an illusion: "Haggard and Lir and Drinn and you and I – we are in a fairy tale, and must go where it goes. But she is real She is real" (109). So real, it appears, that she transcends the fairy tale. But Schmendrick manipulates the tale, and his transformation of the unicorn into Lady Amalthea, who then becomes a traditional fairy-tale princess, ironically inserts the unicorn into the myth.

This is the importance of the first unicorn-Red Bull encounter. Schmendrick begins to revise the fairy tale. Because he changes the unicorn into the princess, the fairy tale must be adjusted to account for this. As he explains to Lady Amalthea,

> You're in the story with the rest of us now, and you must go with it, whether you will or no. If you want to find your people, if you want to become a unicorn again, then you must follow the fairy tale to King Haggard's castle, and wherever else it chooses to take you. The story cannot end without the princess. (128)

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In a sense, two separate tales – that of the unicorn, and that of Schmendrick and Molly – are fused together.

The fairy tale, then, begins again with different parameters, and those parameters from old tales are no longer useful to this tale. A new tale must be written. Once they arrive at Haggard's castle, there is a debate as to how the tale should end; conventionally with Lir and Amalthea marrying, or non-conventionally with the hero and heroine remaining apart. Lir tends to represent the conventional, and Beagle satirizes this by having Lir exaggerated as a hero. He complains, "For her sake, I have become a hero" (150), yet his deeds have no effect on Lady Amalthea, for she has never been in such a tale before. "I have swum four rivers, each in full flood and none less than a mile wide," admits Lir.

> I have climbed seven mountains never before climbed, slept three nights in the Marsh of the Hanged men, and walked live out of that forest where the flowers burn your eyes and the nightingales sing poison. I have.... (150)

And the catalogue goes on . . . and on. Lir even resorts to writing love poems to Lady Amalthea:

> He was sitting on a stool in the corner, evidently writing another poem. "Gazelle," he murmured, tapping his pen against this lips. "Demoiselle, citadel, asphodel, philomel, parallel..." He chose "farewell," and scribbled rapidly. (170)

Lir says, "It's hard to give up being a hero, once you get used to it" (169). He learns how to be a romantic hero, albeit a foolish and silly one, but Lady Amalthea is entirely new to the game and it takes her a while to feel comfortable with her role as princess. When she approaches the castle with Molly and Schmendrick, a sentinel notices her specialness:

> She has a newness. Everything is for the first time. See how she moves, how she walks, how she turns her head – all for the first time anyone has done these things before. (132)

The climax of *The Last Unicorn* revolves around the battle between the unicorn and the Red Bull, and, as importantly, between the traditional and the new: the characters must decide *how* to end their tale, and the fate of the unicorn is really up to them. As Lady Amalthea, the unicorn has forgotten her true being, and she wishes to remain as a mortal and be with Lir. Schmendrick says resignedly,

> You can love, and fear, and forbid things to be what they are, and overact. Let it end here then, let the quest end .... Marry the prince and live happily ever after. (211)

Lady Amalthea learns her role only too well. It is, ironically, Lir who finally acts like a true hero, not a parody of one; he realizes the importance of a true ending, and he will not condone an ending that allows for the unicorn to remain mortal:

> But the true secret of being a hero lies in knowing the order of things.... Things must happen when it is time for them to happen. Quests may not simply be abandoned; prophecies may not be left to rot like unpicked fruit; unicorns may go unrescued for a long time, but not forever. The happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story. (212)

Though Molly wants the tale to end, she is unable to persuade Schmendrick to help. He says, "I have no concern for regulated rescues and official happy endings. That's Lir" (213). And when Lir chastises Schmendrick for his inability to help the unicorn in her battle with the Red Bull, Schmendrick admits with "sad mockery in his voice": "That's what heroes are for" (222). Lir's selfless sacrifice for the unicorn gives the unicorn the power to drive the Red Bull into the sea, thus freeing the trapped unicorns. Prince Lir restores magic back into the world, he fulfills the age-old prophecy, and he does this by consciously inserting himself in the fairy tale – he finally understands what it means to be a hero in a fairy tale.

Yet the tale cannot quite end here, for Beagle intends for his characters to return back tc their old tales and resume their old adventures. Schmendrick tells Lir,

> Your true task has just begun, and you may not know in your life if you have succeeded in it.... As for her, she is a story with no ending, happy or sad. She can never belong to anything mortal enough to want her. (233)

Lir, then, must become part of another unfinished tale and find his happy ending. When Schmendrick and Molly, on their way to their own tale, meet Alison Jocelyn, a damsel in dire distress, Schmendrick sends her to Lir ("'I send all my princesses to him'" [248]) so that Lir's tale can end on a traditional happy note, but he understands that in their current fairy tale such endings are not appropriate. He reasons, "Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed. It is all part of the fairy tale" (246).

Schmendrick and Molly. They too are just beginning their tale, and Beagle has them go "away together, out of this story and into another" (248). Each character can now go on with his or her story, the unicorn the magic that will hover over the tales. The metafictional dimension to *The Last Unicorn* draws attention to the literary merits of the fairy tale, reworking conventional structures into an original one, breathing new life into an old form. Beagle expands fairy-tale discourse; his fantasy of vision speaks more loudly and clearly to a modern world far, far away from the land of the fantastic imagination.

For all his debunking of fairy-tale form, however, Beagle still relies on the archetypal pattern of good versus evil to emphasize his thematic concerns. *The Last Unicorn* is also a fantasy of revision which provides "programs for improving reality" (Hume 102). Near the end of the tale, Schmendrick realizes: "*I did not know that I was so empty, to be so full*" (218). This metaphor of emptiness-fullness mir-

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rors the central theme of the work, that good and evil, innocence and experience are vital to one's understanding of one's self and the world. Raymond Olderman argues,

> Beagle gives us recognition of life's pains and sorrows, but only a symbolically ponderous threat of annihilation; he emphasizes, instead, the balance of caring and loving with a world of wonder, [asking us] to revalue by making us see anew. The rediscovery of wonder in the world may ultimately be the best our decade [the 70s] can offer as a substitute for a truly accepted mythology to move us out of the waste land. (222)

The revisionist strain in the fantasy categorizes and provides for us strategies for living.

The Last Unicorn is about the importance of innocence and the imagination in a fallen world, an innocence, it must be noted, based on experience, a quality of this fallen world. Like Blake, Beagle emphasizes the fearful symmetry between innocence and experience. The unicorn is untainted innocence, the Red bull pure corrupted experience; Molly and Schmendrick are innocents on their way to experience. The tale progresses precisely because the unicorn, Molly, and Schmendrick meet Mommy Fortuna, Haggard, and the Red Bull.

At the beginning of the fantasy we are immersed in a world of innocence, a prelapsarian world of magic. The unicorn's wood is an enchanted wood where "it was always spring" (2). It is Edenic. The hunters represent the realm of experience and they invade the unicorn's wood, one disbelieving in magic and unicorns, the other certainly undecided. One hunter gives warning, however: "This is no world for you. Stay in your forest, and keep your trees and green and your friends long-lived" (5). But they bring temptation to the unicorn; she begins to wonder where her other "friends" truly are. Her curiosity spurs her to leave the unfallen world for the fallen one. In the experienced world none but a select few, those pure of heart, can recognize the unicorn. As the princess who attempts to call a unicorn states:

> If there really were such things as unicorns, one would have to come to me. I called as sweetly as anyone could, and I had the golden bridle. And of course I am pure and untouched. (88)

Sure! But she only pretends to believe, for in her world there is no room for unicorns. The unicorn is welcomed to the world of experience.

Her first dangerous encounter in the new world is with Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival where "creatures of night, [are] brought to light" (15). Mommy Fortuna's carnival is based on illusion; she weaves her "spells of seeming" (23) so that people believe that they are actually seeing caged mythological beasts – a manticore, dragon, satyr, Cerbeus, Midgard Serpent, Arachne. But all these are actually mundane – a dog, crocodile, lion, etc. Mommy Fortuna must ironically cast spells on the unicorn and the harpy even though they are real; the world is too fallen to identify the magical. This world is dangerous, not because people are unable to see through appearances, but because such a demented person as Mommy can see though illusion. After all, she is able to do what is virtually impossible – capture a unicorn and a harpy. The unicorn's magical defences are not powerful enough to protect her completely in this world. Mommy Fortuna's capture and caging of the unicorn is symbolic for her imprisonment of the imagination. The cage represents the experienced world that binds and chains innocence and stifles creativity; it will trap her forever if allowed:

> The cage began to grow smaller. . . . Already she could not turn around. The bars were drawing in, pitiless as the tide or the morning, and they would shear through her until they surrounded her heart, which they would keep a prisoner forever. (40)

An interesting addition to the carnival is the harpy. Don Norford suggests that the harpy reflects the "active power of rage, hatred – what Freud called *thanatos*, the aggressive, destructive, death instinct" (99), and by extension, then, the unicorn represents the contrary – love, compassion, passivity, creation. That both creatures are from the magical realm is significant, for these opposing forces are part of the natural structure. Its imprisonment is also unnatural, and Beagle may be suggesting that such destructiveness is a result of being denied freedom, for only those destroyed by the harpy try to run away. The unicorn explains, "You must never run from anything immortal. It attracts their attention" (46). The precarious balance between unicorn and harpy is essential for the imagination.

Immortality and mortality is another tension that is explored in *The Last Unicorn*.

> I am a king's daughter
> And I grow old within
> The prison of my person,
> The shackles of by skin. (88)

This poem becomes a motif, later sung by Lady Amalthea. Like the cage, the body is also a container of immortality, and the unicorn becomes trapped into mortality. By being mortal, the unicorn begins to forget that she is immortal; she forgets her innocence. But her loss of immortality results in a gain of humanity, and she learns about love. She is changed forever, as she explains:

> I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret, but I do. I regret. (244)

Here we have an interesting revision of the Adam and Eve story: the unicorn is thrust back into her prelapsarian world having tasted from the tree of knowledge – she knows goodness and evil, her innocence is informed by experience, and she must live forever with the burden of such knowledge. Original sin also touches the unicorn.

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In contrast to the unicorn-Lady Amalthea metamorphosis is the Haggard-Red Bull transformation. There is little of merit to these creatures, except that they force the others to act wisely. The Red Bull represents Haggard's subconscious selfish desires – his "eyes were the same color as the horns of the Red Bull (135). "He was the color of blood," writes Beagle of the Red Bull, "but not springing blood of the heart but the blood that stirs under an old wound that never really healed" (131). Contrast: the redness of the bull to the whiteness of the unicorn, the bull's destructiveness to the unicorn's ability to heal. The Red Bull is amorphous, having "no shape at all, but a swirling darkness, the red darkness you see when you close your eyes in pain. The horns had become the two sharpest towers of old King Haggard's crazy castle" (121). Norford finds the Red Bull "associated with Fear, the fear of pain and loss that keeps one from life and makes the world a wasteland" (99). It "represents emptiness, dread, the pain and sorrow of life" while the "unicorn represents fullness, the overflowing horn of plenty, the bounty and beauty of life" (102). The Red Bull is a void, a hollowness that reflects Haggard and Hagsgate's barrenness; it symbolizes caged experience, as Lady Amalthea represents caged innocence. In *The Book of Urizen*, Blake explores the cosmogony myth of Urizen whose fear of the imagination forces him to use reason to contain it, thus separating himself in two. Haggard is like Urizen; he is fearful of unrestrained energy and creativity and joy, so he redirects this energy into the Red Bull who then hunts down the unicorn and traps them in the sea. Whereas the harpy is natural, the Red Bull is man-made, a creature not unlike that in *The Forbidden Planet*. Rintrah, the keeper of the wasteland in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "roars & shakes his fires in the burdened air" and drives "the just man into barren climes"; he is a prototype for the Red Bull.

Haggard's loss of humanity is parallel to the unicorn's acquisition of humanity. One survives, the other is destroyed. Good defeats Evil, but not without a price. Everyone's world is changed: Hagsgate will now become barren as the land becomes fertile, Prince Lir will become the King; a new age begins. The world is on the mend, and the ending is a tentative happy one, the Red Bull as always an ominous presence. But in Beagle's world, and in Blake's, these opposing forces are important: Haggard and the Red Bull force Schmendrick and Prince Lir to find their true selves, and the unicorn has a knowledge that may make her more magical than ever, for she is now universal – immortal, mortal; innocent, experienced. Beagle's revisionist fantasy teaches us that opposition is true friendship, that his fairy tale is complex enough to account for such contraries.

The Last Unicorn is Beagle's masterpiece, a truly original fantasy. It challenges us to revise our conception of literature and reality, and it presents avenues so we can travel wisely. He takes two strains of fantasy – vision and revision – and meshes them together to make a whole that is more powerful that the parts. Norford concludes his study by saying, "Apparently, the immortal and mortal, joy and sorrow, life and death, are equally real halves of the same whole: you cannot have one without the other" (101). This synthesis of opposites recalls Blake's contraries. Brian Attebery proposes that

> the American writer [of fantasy] must find some way of reentering the ancient storytelling guild: he must validate his claim to the archetypes that are the tools of the trade. To do so, he must find an archetypal analogy for his own land – an American fairyland – to which those old world magical motifs may be drawn. (vii)

In *The Last Unicorn* Beagle enters this guild by creating an original fantasy of vision and revision; he plays with metafictional structures and recombines the archetypal patters of fairy tales into a vision that is specifically modern. And American. For all are equal, all have the potentiality for good (and evil), all are free to choose, and even the evil that permeates much of the world can be redirected. Without the Red Bull we can have no unicorns, for in Beagle's world without contraries is no progression. ❦

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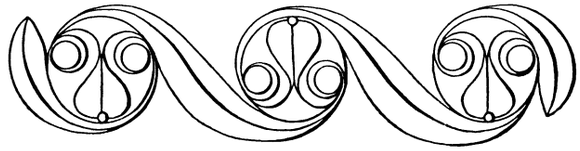

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